

Left and Religion: An Approach beyond the Dichotomy of Progressivism and Reactionism

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OZGUR TASKAYA AND OZDENIZ PEKTAS, APR 5 2011

One of the hotly debated topics in leftist circles is religion. Whilst most leftists, especially since the birth of Marxism, have criticized religion with the eventual desire of its downfall, there have been attempts by some to unite religion and the left (mostly Marxism), as observed in liberation theology, Christian communism and Islamic socialists. Even the system of thought established by Karl Marx was identified by some as resembling a religion itself, considering the scope of its spread and the unshakeable belief in it by many of its proponents. In this modest attempt, we, as non-theist students, will try to discuss the problematic relationship between the left and religion and claim that they are not always incompatible. We hope that this attempt will make way for ensuing articles in e-International Relations so as to further analyze the topic.

As a materialist philosopher, Marx did not hold any belief in god. We would not be mistaken to assert that Marx, like Sigmund Freud, must have been heavily influenced by the atheist philosopher Feuerbach in his views on religion. Marx's statements of religion, especially the one that indicates religion "is the opiate of people" have made his followers affirm that religion is to be strongly scorned. However, we claim that leftists should not be trapped in the one-dimensional analysis of Marxist theory of religion that claims religions should be abolished because they create illusory happiness, thereby letting cruel exploitation go without punishment in this world. Yes, this dimension of the analysis is partly true but the theory, even Marx himself, surpasses this kind of analysis.

The fundamental point we would like to emphasize here is the fact that Marx's approach to religion is different from the Enlightenment's positioning of religion as a reaction against the progressiveness of reason, and we propose that leftists should deal with religion likewise. The examination of social relations, which involves apprehension of moral, religious and institutional structure, forms the basis of Marx's theories and critiques. Therefore, for Marx, when an existing social order is legitimized via mystification by dominant hegemonic class/classes – as if this order were natural – it is not important whether this legitimization is done in line with rationalist principles or metaphysical ones, because both are equally and negatively ideological.

Criticizing classical political economy, Marx says that classical political economy discerned the true face of capitalist relations of production, yet still legitimized capitalism as the ultimate state of humanity due to the fact that it could not make a critique of these relations. That is why classical political economy must be transcended by critique.

The same condition repeats in the context of religion. Religion is not only an illusion but it also includes facts related to social relations between humans. However, it legitimizes these facts not as something to be exceeded but something to be endured. Therefore, it should be exceeded by critique since it forms an ideological structure that thwarts social relations from manifesting themselves as they are. However, while criticizing it, Marx[1] indicates that religion shows itself in a couple of ways: "*Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering." 'Expression' issue is related to the bearing with the distress and oppression in this world that will come back as a reward in 'the other world'. Yet, the 'protest' issue is far more important to us. 'Expression' also contains protest but it is a passive one. The very protest, that is, the action aspect in this world, demands this world to be turned into a heaven. Thomas Muntzer, Sheikh Bedreddin and their adherents can be given as an example to people who applied the 'protest' aspect of religion. Muntzer advises us to seek

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heaven in this world not in the other. Sheikh Bedrettin also emphasizes the same idea, “both heaven and hell are in this world.”

The fact that Marx stated that religion can manifest itself as a protestation sets him apart from the scholastic rationalism that associated religion with reactionism in a negative light. Marx’s distinct position is crucial for leftists. For example, Crouch[2] states that “[t]he Bolsheviks’ non-sectarian approach to Christianity was put to the test by the general strike in Petersburg in January 1905. This culminated in a march of 200,000 workers to petition the tsar on 9 January, which ended in a massacre by troops. The movement was led by a priest, Georgy Gapon, who was widely suspected of being a police spy. The Bolsheviks nonetheless joined the demonstration, after which Lenin made every effort to meet Gapon, speak with him and even recruit him. Gapon was a Russian Orthodox priest and the church was closely tied to the tsarist state, right down to the lowest levels of the village hierarchy. Some of its priests led pogroms against Jews and organized the Black Hundreds, gangs that attacked workers and any opponents of the regime. But the fact that Tsarism used Orthodoxy as a weapon of class rule did not blind the Bolsheviks to the fact that many ordinary Russians held Orthodox beliefs for very different reasons. Therefore, the Bolsheviks were aware of religion’s potential for progressive activism and did not decry it. That is why, they were non-religious, not anti-religious when they came to power. Crouch also says that “[t]here was widespread discussion among Muslims of the similarity of Islamic values with socialist principles. Supporters of ‘Islamic socialism’ appealed to Muslims to set up soviets. Popular slogans included: ‘Religion, freedom and national independence!’ ‘Long live soviet power, long live the sharia!’”

Liberation theology in Latin America is another example on the positive relationship between religion and left. It is accepted at the root of this movement that god stands by the poor; and heaven should be established in this world as also declared by Muntzer and Bedrettin. Many Catholic priests in Latin America take part in activist actions like strikes together with workers and revolutionaries. Moreover, churches could even become bases for armed struggles of revolutionaries. Ernesto Cardenal[3], a Nicaraguan priest who is one of the most famous liberation theologians, claims that first Christians were the first communists and Marx’s description of communism can be found in New Testament. In Acts 4: 34-35, it is written that “neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid *them* down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.” In addition to this, Acts 4: 44 goes like this: “all that believed were together, and had all things common” These lines show, according to Cardenal, all Christians had to be communists too.

It should also not be forgotten that there have been many progressive movements that included religious elements within them. What needs to be done is that the resources within religious traditions which have the capacity to lead people toward a non-hierarchical and emancipatory way of life should be revealed and emphasized by religious leaders as well as laymen. This is a highly essential endeavor for religious people if they want to falsify the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durutti’s famous quote “the only church that illuminates is a burning church”. When theology emerges as a point of reference for egalitarian and emancipatory progress of human beings, religion cannot be regarded as a barrier to leftist ideologies any more and churches can illuminate without having to burn. After all, religion is all about interpretation. Hermeneutics of religion from an emancipatory point of view is what should be sought after by leftists.

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[1] Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’* London: Cambridge UP, 1977.

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[2] Crouch, Dave. "The Bolsheviks and Islam." *International Socialism*. 6 Apr. 2006. <<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=181>>.

[3] Cardenal, Ernesto. "Es Komme Die Republik Der Himmel Auf Die Erd." Speech. 2010. <<http://kirchentag.blog.rosalux.de/files/2010/05/Ernesto-Cardenal-Rede-in-Rostock-Final-4.pdf>>.